

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

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### Witness Statement

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**Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Regarding HR 2409, *El Camino Real De Los Tejas National Historic Trail Act***  
by  
**Al J. Notzon III**  
Executive Director  
Alamo Area Council of Governments  
May 9, 2000

Dear Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the issues relating to the designation of *El Camino Real De Los Tejas* as a National Historic Trail. This subject is of enormous importance to all the communities whose creation was nurtured by this remarkable road network. I am pleased to testify today in favor of H.R. 2409.

The Alamo Area Council of Governments has a long and abiding association with the communities of the *Camino Real de Los Tejas*. Over 200 miles of this magnificent trail network, which stretches from the *Rio Grande* across Texas into Louisiana, lie within our region.

As part of an economic development strategy targeting enhanced heritage tourism, the Alamo Area Council of Governments has been working with the communities of the *El Camino Real de Los Tejas* since the Fall of 1988. At that time we conducted public meetings in our rural counties for local economic development input. In these meetings what would be called "heritage tourism" loomed large among the economic development strategies rural residents wanted to pursue.

In response to this local mandate, the first meeting of our Alamo-La Bahia Corridor Committee (representing 5 counties and 15 rural communities) was held in December of that year. Because of the success of the Alamo-La Bahia Corridor (which encompasses a part of *El Camino Real de los Tejas*), communities on another stretch of the *Camino Real* requested a similar coordinated activity for their counties, and the Market Trail was born which has resulted in over 30 communities coordinating monthly tourism related events.

When Texas' Old San Antonio Road Commission undertook a commemorative caravan in 1991 publicizing the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this remarkable road system, AACOG was asked to assist with the caravan coordination for the area from the Mexican border through New Braunfels. AACOG also served as advisor for the subsequent NPS feasibility study regarding inclusion of the *caminos reales* in Texas in the National Historic Trail System.

AACOG also provided testimony during the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress regarding S 2276, which passed in the Senate

but failed to make it to the floor of the House. Since that time AACOG has been hosting a series of meetings focused on the *Camino Real* and is very sensitive to concerns of both the cities and the rural ranching community. Stimulated by the completion of the NPS Feasibility Study, during the last two years our Camino Real de Los Tejas meetings have evolved in membership and in focus from local, to statewide, to trail-wide. Initially, the group was composed of representatives from communities and ranches within our immediate region. We were soon joined by representatives from the western segment of the trail (i.e., Eagle Pass and Laredo) and then in November 1999, representatives from the eastern segment of Camino Real de los Tejas (i.e., Nacogdoches and St. Augustine) attended.

At that November meeting it was decided that video conferencing could ameliorate the distance problem. In May our video conferencing expanded from three to four sites to include Natchitoches, Louisiana. Attendees are a diverse group: land owners, educators, city officials, historians, economic development and tourism specialist, chambers of commerce representatives as well as descendants from both the founders of the trail and those who met the founders of the trail. (We were honored to have the Chief of the Los Adaes Tribe join us for our last meeting.)

These meetings not only provide an opportunity to increase our knowledge of this remarkable trail system, but also give communities a chance to interact as neighbors on the trail by sharing information, plans and experiences. Pooling the talents and knowledge found in such a large number of diverse communities is in itself a remarkable resource. Trail designation would most certainly benefit this process.

Almost all the communities have projects or plans for preservation and restoration projects that would enhance a National Historic Trail or be enhanced by having the Trail Designation. Projects range from a simple Camino Real Garden to site plans developed by the A&M University Land Heritage Institute to provide visitors with a window into past lifeways, earlier technologies as well as antique breeds of domestic animals . . . and how such a site can function as both an educational and a tourism asset.

Visitor centers and museum enhancements to feature information on the *camino real* are also under discussion. At a recent meeting, Dr. Rex Ball, the Director of the Institute of Texas Cultures, described innovative, hi-tech educational opportunities and how the Institute can assist *camino* community museums.

*Camino real* towns, cities and counties from across the State of Texas -and from Louisiana-- have indicated that the designation of *El Camino Real de Los Tejas* as a National Historic Trail will provide great economic development potential as well as fostering local pride in our history and multicultural heritage.

It should be noted that National Historic Trail designation can be economically advantageous for *camino* communities and rural areas in a variety of ways:

First, diversification of the rural economy--the development and fostering of heritage and nature tourism can add another "cash crop" to the farmer/rancher's survival strategy.

Enhancement of visibility and public awareness is another benefit--Trail designation, its signage and related coordinated marketing can far exceed any marketing efforts that could be undertaken by a small, individual community. Those maps and trail markers are out there, guiding potential visitors 365 days a year; and it should also be noted that when those signs bring visitors to a *camino real* city, town or rural community, there is a special opportunity for a mutually beneficial extended relationship. It has been said that the initial visit of a tourist is rather like a first date. Visitors can return again as repeat vacationers. . . or perhaps as new residents, new investors or new businesses. (The City of San Antonio provides many living examples

of this concept translated into practice.)

Still another substantial benefit of Trail Designation is that it would draw attention to the highly significant Hispanic contribution to the growth and development of our state and nation.

At the same time in response to the private property concerns of rural landowners, we have asked a number of our concerned landowners how the legislation could be changed so that they, too, can be comfortable with it.

The new bill HR 2409 includes the following wording to address the concerns indicated during our conversations with landowners:

**Notwithstanding section 7(g), the United States is authorized to acquire privately owned real property or an interest in such property for purposes of the trail only with the willing consent of the owner of such property and shall have no authority to condemn or otherwise appropriate privately owned real property or an interest in such property for the purposes of such trail.**

The bill also states that participation in the site certification program is entirely voluntary.

It should be noted that the Board of the Alamo Area Council of Governments has twice (in 1998 and 1999) unanimously approved a letter to be sent to the Texas Governor and the Texas Congressional Delegation that included the following text:

**The Caminos Reales in Texas have contributed significantly to the development of our great state and our sister states to the East and West as well as the country of Mexico. Established by the Spanish more than 300 years ago to bolster their northeastern frontier, the caminos followed already established prehistoric Indian and game trails. After the Spanish Colonial Period, these trails were the way west for thousands of future settlers. (Some historians say that more people came west through Natchitoches on El Camino than went through St. Louis!) The Camino Real came to be known as The Old San Antonio Road, and it connected with historic trails in Louisiana, which in turn connected with the Natchez Trace.**

**With passage of National Trail designation for the Caminos Reales in Texas, a continuous, signed National Trail Network would be born that would provide extraordinary tourism opportunities to travelers all the way from the East Coast to the Mexican Border and beyond and provide an impetus for "hands on" resource preservation, interpretation and public use. Considering the success of San Antonio as a world-class tourist destination city, it is clear that the tourism stimulated by the creation of the Caminos Reales De Los Tejas can provide a multitude of economic development opportunities and benefits for communities both large and small as well as the rural areas along the route.**

**Noting that participation in the National Trail program is entirely voluntary, the Alamo Area Council of Governments (AACOG ) Board, representing a 12-county region, strongly endorses the creation of El Camino Real Por Los Tejas National Trail in the knowledge that such a designation can foster economic development through increased tourism and enhance appreciation of our magnificent history and multi-ethnic heritage. We respectfully urge you to actively support legislation for the inclusion of El Camino Real de Los Tejas in the National Trail System.**

Our letter is but one of many and every day more resolutions are being passed across the State to join the growing list of support. (See attachment.)

Taking into consideration the many resolutions of support that have been and are forthcoming from across the state it is clear very many Texans share the view that *El Camino Real De Los Tejas* has played an essential role in the development of both our great state and our nation, and we would therefore respectfully request that you favorably consider H.R.2409 to include this enormously important trail in the National

Historic Trail System.

Thank you.

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